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THOUGHTS ON THE USE
OF THE
VULGAR AND THE MEAN IN ART.

FROM SCHILLER. BY G. H. LEWES.

THE *Vulgar* is everything which does not speak to the mind, and which raises merely a sensuous interest. There are, it is true, a thousand things which are vulgar from their subject or contents; but, as the vulgarity of the subject can be elevated by its treatment, it is here the question only of the *vulgar in form*. A dull man will debase the noblest subject by his dull handling of it; a great intellect, on the contrary, knows how to elevate and adorn the meanest subject by linking it to something spiritual, and by discerning a noble side even of this ignoble subject, to which other men are blind. So a historian of inferior order will judge of the most insignificant achievements of his hero with the same care and gravity as his noblest deeds, and pause as long over his genealogy, the fashion of his dress, and his domestic trivialities, as over his struggles and undertakings; his greatest deeds are related in so spiritless a manner, that no reader can clearly see their significance. On the other hand, a historian of intellect and true nobility of soul throws an interest over his hero's private life, and gives force and significance to the most trivial actions. The Dutch painters exhibit a vulgar taste; the Italians a great and noble taste; the Greeks still more so—they lived wholly in the ideal, cast aside every vulgar trait, and chose no vulgar subjects.

A portrait painter can treat his subject either vulgarly or nobly. He treats it vulgarly when he perfects the *accidental* and *contingent* as carefully as the *necessary* and *essential*—when he neglects the truly great, and develops the trivial. He treats it nobly when he knows how to select the most striking and interesting, separating the *contingent* from the *essential*, and develops the trivial only in so far as it is connected with, and serves to bring out, the noble. But nothing is truly noble, save the expression of the mind, in action, gesture, and situation.

The poet treats his subject vulgarly when he dwells upon the insignificant actions, and hurries over the truly important ones. He treats it nobly when he throws the greatness of his own soul over it. Homer's genius empowered him to treat the shield of Achilles in a manner at once spiritual and astonishing, though the making of a shield considered *per se* is a vulgar subject enough.*

* The same remark will apply to Schiller's own poem, the *Song of*

But the Mean is still worse than the Vulgar, which must be distinguished from it as not exhibiting something merely *negative*, not merely a deficiency of the spiritual and noble, but something *positive*, viz. coarseness of feeling, bad morals, and contemptible sentiments. The vulgar is only an evidence of the want of a desirable advantage in composition; the mean, of the want of a *qualification* which is imperatively demanded of every one.

Revenge, for example, considered *per se*, wheresoever it may be found, in whatever manner it may exhibit itself, is something *vulgar*, because it betokens a want of moral greatness. But we distinguish this revenge as *mean*, when the man who practises it makes use of contemptible resorts to accomplish it. The *Mean* always indicates something coarse and plebeian; but a man of rank can also act and think vulgarly, if he want the requisite gifts. A man acts vulgarly when he thinks only of his own enjoyment; and therein does he stand opposed to the noble man, who can and will forget himself to bestow some good upon another. The same man, however, would act meanly if he purchased his enjoyment at the cost of his honor, and did not respect the laws of society. The Vulgar, therefore, is opposed to the Noble; the Mean both to the Noble and to *Bien-séance*. To give vent to every passion, in spite of every obstacle, moral or physical—to gratify every impulse, without allowing it to be curbed by the rules of propriety, much less of morality—is mean, and betrays a mean soul.

In works of art we can also fall into the mean, not only from the choice of a mean subject, which the sense of propriety and capability excludes, but also when we handle it meanly. An artist handles his subject meanly when he either draws attention to that point of view which good taste would fain conceal, or when he gives it such an expression as leads to mean *ideas naturally connected with it*. In the life of the greatest man appear some few mean actions, but only a mean taste would think of selecting and painting them. There are paintings out of Holy Writ where the Apostles, the Virgin, and Christ himself, are drawn with an expression, as if they had been selected from out the lowest *canaille*. All such works betray a mean taste, which gives us the right to conclude that the artist's conceptions themselves were coarse and plebeian.

There are, it is true, cases in which the mean may find a fit place in art, viz. where it is to excite a laugh.

the *Bell*; Catullus's exquisite odes, "*Passer delicæ meæ puellæ*," and "*Lugete O Veneres Cupidinesque*," with many others.

A man of good breeding can also sometimes, without betraying a debased taste, relish a laugh at the coarse but true expression of nature, and at the contrast between the customs of the *beau monde* and the *canaille*. The drunkenness of a man of rank would excite displeasure wherever he was noticed, but a drunken postillion or sailor makes us laugh. Jests which would be insupportable from the mouth of a man of education, amuse us from the mouth of the people. Of this kind are many scenes in Aristophanes, which, however, sometimes overstep these limits, and are merely disgusting. It is on this account that we relish parodies, where the sentiments, modes of speech, and actions of the common people are attributed to the same cultivated persons that the poet has represented with all seriousness and propriety. So long as the poet merely attempts a laughable piece, and means no more than to amuse us, we allow him to use the means; but he must take care not to excite our displeasure or disgust.

Displeasure is excited when the mean is attributed, where we absolutely cannot pardon it, *e. g.* to men from whom we are authorized to expect purer morals. Does the artist thus handle his subject? then does he either offend *Truth*, because we are more willing to hold him for a liar than believe that men of education could really act so meanly, or else his characters offend our moral feelings, and excite, what is still worse, our indignation.* It is quite otherwise in the *Farce*, where, between the dramatist and the audience there is a tacit contract, that one has not to expect the *truth*. In the farce we dispense with the truth in delineation, and the writer possesses a privilege to deceive or to lie to us; for here the comic bases itself directly on its contrast with truth, and it is impossible to be at the same time true and contrasted with truth.

But there are also in the earnest and tragic certain rare cases wherein the Mean may be applied. As such, however, it must pass into the terrible, and the momentary shock sustained by our taste be extinguished by the fierce activity of the passions, and thereby become complicated in a high tragic emotion: *e. g.* *Theft* is something absolutely mean, and in spite of all that our hearts can suggest for the excuse of a thief, how strongly he may have been led to the action by the pressure of surrounding circumstances, yet is the brand-mark inextinguishably stamped upon his brow, and æsthetically he remains ever a mean subject.

Taste pardons here even less than Morality, and its severe judgment-seat is stronger because *an æsthetic subject is also answerable for all the ideas which simul-*

taneously spring up, and which are occasioned by the storm of emotion awakened in our hearts. The moral judgment, on the contrary, is abstracted from all chance or accident. A man who steals is therefore in the highest degree objectionable as a poetic representation. Let, however, this same man once become a murderer, and though it is true he is *morally* still more objectionable, yet he becomes therefrom a grade more applicable, because he begins to be æsthetic. He who (I speak here throughout, according to *æsthetic*, not *moral*, judgment) has debased himself by an *infamy*, can again be somewhat elevated, and attract our æsthetic attention through a *crime*!

This variation of the moral and æsthetic judgments is remarkable, and deserves strict scrutiny. We can adduce many causes for it. *First*, as I have already said, that because the æsthetic judgment depends upon the imagination, all the simultaneous ideas (*nebenvorstellungen*) which are developed within us by the subject, and which stand in a natural correlation with the same, influence this judgment. If, therefore, these simultaneous ideas and relations are of a low, base kind, so inevitably do they bebase the *radical* subject.

Secondly: in the æsthetic judgment we look only at the *strength*, in the moral judgment at the *lawfulness*. Want of strength is something always contemptible, and every action which betokens a want of strength is and must be contemptible.* Every cunning and sneaking action is revolting to us on account of the deficiency of power which it betrays; on the other hand, a devilish action, if it only betokens some great power, can æsthetically please us. A theft announces a sneaking, cunning mind; a murder has at least the appearance of strength—it at least regulates the scale of interest that we æsthetically take in it, according to the scale of strength which it indicates.†

Thirdly: in the contemplation of some heavy and frightful crime we are drawn away from the consideration of its *quality*, and our attention is riveted on its fearful *consequences*. The stronger emotion then absorbs the weaker. We do not look backward into the soul of the doer, but forward into his fate, and into the consequences of his deed. So soon as we begin to *tremble*, so soon is every delicacy of taste obliterated. The principal impression entirely fills our souls; and the contingent simultaneous ideas (*zufälligen nebenideen*),

* Of course this means want of moral or physical strength, for the two are seldom conjoined, and neither is sufficient to prevent contempt.

† To murder a sleeping man as a common house-breaker, excites very little admiration of the doer's strength, and interests us only through its *consequences*; but to murder a sleeping king (Macbeth) requires an immense power of resolution, and our interest is proportionably excited. It is to be observed that Schiller, in this essay, lays down principles, very rarely troubling himself with illustrations. I make this remark, in order to induce the reader to *apply* these principles, and thus convince himself of their value.

* This admirable rule for the humorist is directed forcibly against Aristophanes, whose defenders forget that it is not his licentiousness that offends so much as the moral degradation evinced in his ridicule of Socrates and Euripides, which comes under the lash of Schiller, when he says, "In the life of the greatest man appear some few mean actions," etc.

which properly depend on, and result from the Mean, are extinguished by this greater impression. Hence it is that the theft of the young Rechberg, in the play of *Verbrechen aus Ehrsucht* is not revolting on the stage, but really tragic. The poet has, with great art, so conducted the circumstances, that we are impetuously hurried forward, and have no breathing time for reflection. The dreadful misery of his family, and particularly the grief of his father, are subjects which hurry our attention from the doer, and irresistibly conduct it to the consequences of his deed. We are too much affected by other things to think of the shame which should brand the theft; in short, the Mean becomes concealed in the Fearful. It is singular that this said theft of Rechberg has not such a revolting effect on the audience as the more groundless *suspicion* of a theft has in another play. Here is a young and innocent officer suspected to have stolen a silver spoon, which is afterward found; the Mean, therefore, is here only imagined; it is mere suspicion; yet, nevertheless, it does irretrievable harm to the innocent hero of the piece in our æsthetic judgment. The cause of this is, because the *supposition* that a man could act meanly proves that we have no strong opinion of his morals. A man is considered a man of honor so long as he does not show himself to be the contrary.

If we believe anything contemptible of him, therefore, it looks as though he had on some occasion, by some action, given cause for the *probability* of such a suspicion, although, properly speaking, the meanness of unwarranted suspicion is on the side of the suspector. It does the hero of this piece still greater harm, because he is an officer and lover of a woman of rank and education. With these two predicates is the predicate of a theft a shocking contrast; and it is impossible for us not to remember, when he is by the side of his mistress, that he may have the silver spoon in his pocket. The greatest misfortune in this case is, that he does not dream of the debasing suspicion which encircles him: for were it to do so, he would then as an officer demand bloody satisfaction; the consequences would then rise into the Terrible, and the Mean would vanish.*

Still we must distinguish the Mean in sentiment from the Mean in rank and condition. The first is beneath all æsthetic worth; the last can very well be used. *Slavery* is mean, but a slavish sentiment in liberty is contemptible: a slavish occupation, when unaccompanied by such a sentiment, is not; much rather will the meanness of condition when united to the loftiness of

* From our ignorance of the piece to which Schiller here alludes, it is impossible that we should come to a right estimate of this illustration. If the audience suspected the officer, then are the foregoing remarks unanswerable; but if the dramatist had so contrived that the audience should be in perfect possession of his innocence, while, at the same time, from equivocal circumstances, the suspicion naturally and inevitably falls on him, *grounded on these circumstances alone*, then he excites our deepest interest and pity.

thought become sublime. The master of Epictetus, when he struck him, acted meanly; but the stricken slave exhibited a lofty soul. True greatness shines but the more honorably from a mean condition, and the artist need not fear selecting his hero from a contemptible environment so long as he is assured that the expression of inward nobility is at his command.

But that which may be allowed to the poet is not always permissible to the painter. The one brings his object only before the imagination; the other, on the contrary, immediately before the sense. The impression of a picture is therefore not only more vivid and defined than that of the poem, but, moreover, the painter cannot, by means of his *natural signs* (color and form), make the *inward* state of things so visible and appreciable as the poet by means of his *symbolical signs** (words, images), and yet it is the inward only that can reconcile us to the outward—the noble mind to the ignoble frame or condition. When Homer brings before us Ulysses in his beggar's rags, so is it for us to choose to what extent we shall develop this picture to the mind's eye (*wir uns dieses Bild ausmalen*), and how long we shall contemplate it. In no case, however, has it vividness sufficient to become disagreeable or disgusting. But where the painter, or still more the actor, would attempt to portray such a portrait of Ulysses with accuracy, we should then turn away with aversion, because here we have not the force of the impression under our control: we *must see* what the painter shows us, and cannot so easily repulse those mean simultaneous ideas which necessarily spring up in the mind.

THE Greeks and Romans erected a temple to each individual of their numerous deities. The buildings were consequently of limited extent. . . . The citizens sacrificed singly to the gods, or attended public festivals, comprehending large masses of the people; in which event the officiating priest or priestess entered the temple, and the assembled votaries were grouped without. In our churches, on the contrary, the population of a city is often congregated for hours; and how magnificently adapted for the object is the vast and solemn interior of a Gothic cathedral, in which the voice of the priest reverberates like thunder, and the chorus of the people rises like a mountain gust, praising the great Father of all, and rousing the affrighted conscience of the infidels; while the mighty organ, the tyrant of music, rages like a hurricane, and rolls his deep floods of sound in sublime accompaniment! How grand were the conceptions of the rational barbarians to whom Europe is indebted for these vast and noble structures! And how immeasurably they surpass, for all meditative purposes, the modern application of Greek and Roman temples, on an enlarged scale, to the purposes of Christian worship!—*Blackwood's Magazine*.

In most families, interests are far safer subjects of conversation than opinions.—*Boyes*.

* It is thus I translate *willkürlichen zeichen*, as the word *arbitrary* can by no means here express the meaning, nor indeed distinguish it from the color and form of the painter, which are equally arbitrary.